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AUTHOR Fanning, Jim
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ABSTRACT

This digest examines the pressures that have led to school consolidation, what consolidation has achieved, the role of community in education, and the ways that school consolidation undermines that role. Belief in the principle of economies of scale and the pursuit of national educational goals related to economic competitiveness have led school leaders to seek "the one best system" of schooling--usually, the large comprehensive high school with feeder districts. As rural communities with weakened economies have become more dependent on state funds, these attitudes plus state funding and accreditation formulas have led to increased school consolidation. However, large standardized systems may result in impersonal climate, increased bureaucracy, and low student participation, which in turn lead to social conflict in schools and disruptive student behavior. In addition, growing evidence indicates that school consolidation offers little or no advantage in controlling costs. Another, less discussed, reason for reconsidering consolidation involves the important role that community plays in education. People understand situations and events through two kinds of thought: paradigmatic thought based on technical knowledge (usually learned in school) and narrative thought (personal stories) about grounded experiences. Both modes of interpreting experience are influenced by local culture absorbed while participating in the community. Both small rural towns and urban neighborhoods can offer community naturally, but schools can offer only certain aspects of community. When the school is an interwoven part of the community, both are potent educators. (SV)

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RURAL SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION AND STUDENT LEARNING

By Jim Fanning

An ERIC Digest

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Rural School Consolidation and Student Learning

by Jim Fanning

ERIC DIGEST

STATE OFFICIALS and local boards, operating under pressure to run schools efficiently and meet national goals, have exercised their authority to consolidate schools. This Digest examines (1) the pressures that have led to school consolidation, (2) the effect of consolidation in addressing social and fiscal pressures, (3) the role of community in education, and (4) the ways school consolidation undermines that role. This examination is designed to help readers assess the relationships of community, student learning, and the logic of consolidation. Such a discussion is uncommon. Usually, a discussion of consolidation focuses on curriculum and school finance. See EDO-RC-94-1, EDO-RC-91-10, EDO-RC-94-6, and EDO-RC-90-11 for more information on related issues.

Pressures Spurring Consolidation

The logic for consolidating schools springs from an idea born in the late 19th century industrial era: *Economy of scale* is the idea that you can reduce your production cost by increasing the size of the facility. Since that era, school systems have based their organizational structures on the belief that education can contribute to an optimal social order using techniques adapted from industry (Orr, 1992).

An external force that may influence decisions about recent consolidation efforts has been a series of federal reports, beginning with *A Nation at Risk*, that have prescribed national goals for education. According to these reports, a chief national goal is to produce a work-force that will help the U.S. remain economically competitive in the global economy (Spring, 1990). The dual commitments to principles of economy of scale and pursuit of national goals encourage contemporary school leaders to seek what David Tyack describes as *the one best system* of schooling. For most people, *the one best system* translates into the large comprehensive high school with feeder districts.

Other external forces at work in the consolidation of schools include powerful technological and economic changes and the demands of the consumer culture. For example, in farming communities, a handful of large agribusinesses now manage most of the property (Davidson, 1990). The consolidation of farms has fractured the culture of rural towns as family members or whole families migrate away from their agrarian roots. Schools and other social institutions and local enterprises follow. A one-way flow of resources has drained much of the vitality from farming and other rural communities. Local crops, timber, and minerals flow out of the local economy to supply and bolster the nation's consumer culture (Nachtigal, 1994). This one-way flow also includes many youth.

Today, low-paying service jobs that are dependent on the metropolitan consumer economy typify the work in rural communities. Weak local economies provide weak financial support for rural schools, which has to be supplemented with state funds to meet equitable education standards. The pressure for a more equitable distribution of limited state monies has led to funding and accreditation formulas that are tough for rural community schools to meet. School consolidation becomes the official solution.

What Consolidation has Achieved

People inside and outside the decision-making arena have begun to question the role schools can and should play in improving the social order in their communities. Many adults express strong concern about the character and behavior of young people in this country, including disruptive and often violent behavior of students (Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1994). Other concerns include the disintegration of families, the loss of stable communities to support families (Eitzen, 1992), and the lack of clarity about who should teach values and beliefs (Kaplan, 1994; Noddings, 1995).

There is evidence that school consolidation may worsen some of these problems. Most school district administrators emphasize a standard sequenced curricula, prescribed instruction, and narrowly focused evaluation (Cherryholmes, 1988). Common problems that come with such standardized systems include impersonal climate, increased bureaucracy, and low levels of student participation. In turn, these problems are indirectly linked to social conflict in schools (Lee & Smith, 1994). The intensity of these problems increases as schools get larger.

Besides social concerns, many rural people face intense fiscal concerns in the running of their schools. There is growing evidence that school consolidation offers little or no financial advantage in controlling costs (Young, 1994). Still, there are other, less discussed, reasons for hesitating in the rush to consolidate schools.

Community as Teacher

In small towns that still have a school, community members recognize it as the hub of local activities and a major resource to the town (Nachtigal, 1994). However, people often overlook the reverse—the important role the community plays in education. An example of this lack of recognition was evident in testimony given during a recent school consolidation hearing. One observer commented that no one mentioned the potential loss of family involvement in school affairs. Several writers *have* addressed the role of a healthy local culture in the nurturing of healthy people.

First, consider what is meant by a *healthy community*. Wendell Berry (1993) offered this definition:

> Such a community is (among other things) a set of arrangements between men and women. These

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arrangements include marriage, family structure, divisions of work and authority, and responsibility for the instruction of children and young people (119, 120).

Edward Sapir offers a similar definition in his comparison of *genuine culture* to *spurious culture* (in Bruner, 1990). Genuine culture exercises a great deal of control over the roles, relationships, and responsibilities of their members. Such cultures are highly viable and can sustain internal social, political and economic activities without depending overly much on outside sources. In contrast, spurious cultures suffer internal instability due to the influence of an external culture, and are far less viable. The good news is that people living and working in rural towns still have many qualities needed to build and sustain a genuine culture (Spindler, Spindler, Trueba, & Williams, 1990).

Jerome Bruner (1990) and Donald Oliver (1989) clarified the importance of culture, as defined by Berry and Sapir, in the development of a person's personality and social disposition. Oliver said there were two ways culture influences what people know. The first, *grounded knowing*, results from experiencing fully an event as it unfolds. For example, you might experience a wheat harvest by rubbing a few heads of wheat in the palms of your hands and separating the chaff from the kernels by gently blowing into your palm. Do this while you watch the grain pour from a truck into the hopper at a storage elevator, and while standing in a cloud of flour dust. This is grounded knowing. The second way of knowing, *technical knowing*, has to do with using charts, calculations, documents, and technology to guide a harvest. Technical knowledge is important for managing resources, among other things. It can link us rationally and strategically to the larger economy, but it is grounded knowing that links us personally to the natural phases of our habitat.

Bruner (1990) explained the ways people use technical and grounded knowing to understand the events of their lives. Two kinds of thought—*narrative* and *paradigmatic*—enable people to understand situations and events. Paradigmatic thought arrives at explanations based on technical knowing. Students' experiences in schools are mostly technical and paradigmatic. The narrative mode is the stories people tell about their grounded experiences, their interpretive, unfolding autobiographies.

Both modes of interpreting experience are influenced by beliefs, traditions, and values learned while participating in the community—the more genuine the better. Local cultures, according to Bruner, can help people integrate their different ways of knowing, so they can function and find meaning in what they experience. Thus, the primary way to help people learn to make good decisions is through the collective wisdom, beliefs, and values of their community, or in other words, its culture.

Reuven Feuerstein (1980) also wrote about the importance of culture in helping people use their technical and grounded ways of knowing. Qualities such as learning to plan, knowing how to cooperate, recognizing and applying accuracy and precision, developing a work ethic, and understanding change are the result of culturally focused experience and thinking. When the culture is weak (i.e., more spurious than genuine), a child's potential to learn is reduced.

Taken together, these scholars have told us that reasonable and responsible behavior depends on sound, logical thought, based on shared values that result from both technical and grounded experience mediated by community. Small, rural towns and urban neighborhoods can offer community naturally. Schools can offer only certain aspects of community. When the school is an interwoven part of the community, both are potent educators.

Conclusions

Most school leaders and citizens have a strong and deep-seated faith in technical and structural solutions to the problems of schools (Orr, 1992). Thus, discussions about school improvement get expressed in purely economic terms, leaving out powerful cultural considerations. By separating schools from communities, consolidation may be contributing to the social problems that concern parents and educators. The sound development of children is closely linked to the well-being of communities. Consolidating schools often destroys those links.

Perhaps deliberations about school reorganization should begin by answering the question "What should our young people have the chance to learn?" If your response is that children need help in interpreting the events of their lives (grounded knowing) by understanding the connection of these events to the larger human experience (technical knowing), then consolidation may not be a good choice.

Alternatives exist. School staff could help communities find new ways to tap the talent and resources both within and outside the community. Districts could explore ways to organize collaboratives and enter partnerships with public and private institutions and foundations. They could also work closely with local decision makers to focus schools' instructional programs on subject matter found in or near the town or neighborhood (Nactigal, 1994; Shelton, 1994).

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Jim Fanning works as an education consultant for small and rural schools with the Mid-continent Regional Educational Lab and the Program for Rural Services and Research at the University of Alabama.

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